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LONG QUEUES AT FUEL OUTLETS AMID FEARS OF POST-ELECTION PRICE HIKE
Motorists thronged petrol bunks in parts of the country on Monday, amid buzz of a fuel shortage and a sharp price rise after the West Bengal polls

PANIC BUYING SPARKS SHORTAGE IN ANDHRA

Rumours of an imminent price rise sparked panic buying in Andhra Pradesh, resulting in shortages and more than 400 petrol pumps running dry over the weekend. Long queues of vehicles were seen at many outlets across the state. "We are receiving information that diesel is getting exhausted everywhere from our dealers," a fuel retailer's association member in Guntur told reporters

OVER 30% SURGE IN FUEL DEMAND: MINISTRY

"We have observed... 30-33 per cent (growth) in demand for fuels like diesel. That is why certain retail outlets faced issues," Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said
■ In Andhra, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu directed state officials and OMC officials to work in tandem to restore normalcy in fuel supply

Wednesday
WHEN THE LAST PHASE OF WEST BENGAL ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD

FTA inked, India to get duty-free access to NZ

Wellington commits \$20 billion investment in India over 15 years

PUSHPITA DEY @ New Delhi

INDIA and New Zealand on Monday signed a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA) that offers duty-free access for 100% Indian exports to the island nation, which will get market access for 70.03% of the tariff lines covering 95% of the bilateral trade value. The remaining 29.97% tariff lines have been excluded to protect India's sensitive sectors such as dairy and agriculture.

New Zealand has also committed to invest \$20 billion in India over 15 years.

The pact is expected to be implemented by the end of this year after New Zealand Parliament's approval.

"The investment commitment of \$20 billion by New Zealand will further strengthen our cooperation in agriculture, manufacturing, innovation and technology, paving the way for a more prosperous and dynamic future for both countries," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a social media post.

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal said that New Zealand has committed market access in 118 sectors and most favoured nation status in 139 sectors while opening dedicated work, study, and holiday visa pathways for Indian professionals, students, and young travellers. An official statement noted that the FTA will significantly boost MSMEs and enhance competitiveness in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, footwear, gems and jewellery, engineering goods, and processed foods.



Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal with New Zealand Trade Minister Todd McClay during the signing of the free trade agreement in New Delhi Monday | PT

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- \$20 billion investment commitment over 15 years
- Special emphasis on strengthening MSMEs and women-led enterprises
- India offers market access in 70.03% of the tariff lines, which covers 95% of New Zealand's bilateral trade
- India protects key interests in dairy and agriculture; benefit for labour-intensive sectors like textile and leather
- New Zealand facilitates health and traditional medicine services for the first time
- Student mobility and post study work visa for STEM graduates, skilled professionals; opens new visa pathway for 5,000 skilled occupations

India's current tariffs on sheep meat, wool and coal from New Zealand will be scrapped immediately while duties on seafood and horticulture items—including cherries and avocados—will be phased out over seven years. India has cut tariffs on New Zealand wine by 66-83% over 10 years. Tariffs on

bulk infant formula and peptones will be phased out in seven years.

"We have committed to work closely with India to help Prime Minister Modi meet his ambition of increasing the earnings of Indian farmers and growers by 50%," New Zealand Trade Minister Todd McClay said.

Forces to stay after Bengal poll: Shah

SUBHENDU MAITI @ Kolkata

IN what appeared to be an assurance to West Bengal voters who had normalised post-poll violence, Union home minister Amit Shah on Monday announced that the Central Armed Paramilitary Force (CAPF) will remain deployed in the state for 60 days after the second and final phase of polling.

The announcement came on a day when campaigning for 142 seats in the final phase ended. Shah has been camping here for over a week to oversee the BJP's poll preparations.

Post-poll violence in the past has resulted in loss of lives and destruction of property.

Addressing an election rally in Behala, on the southern fringes of Kolkata, he said, "Brothers and sisters, go and vote on the 29th, do not worry about Didi's (Mamata Banerjee) goons. The Election Commission of India has deployed CAPF at every nook and cranny, and I am telling you that even though the BJP will come to power after the elections, central forces will remain here for 60 more days."

He added that if voted to



Home Minister Amit Shah at Kapil Muni Ashram in Gangasagar, West Bengal | PT

power, the BJP would initiate action against political violence and illegal immigrants. Shah also reiterated the party's intention to implement a Uniform Civil Code in the state if it forms the government.

He further asserted that after May 4, the practice of polygamy would not be permitted in the state.

After wrapping up his campaign, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an open letter to the state, said: "Serving and securing West Bengal is my responsibility. Turning every challenge before West Bengal into an opportunity is also part of my destiny. I won't back down from this responsibility."

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee undertook a 6 km roadshow in south Kolkata, which is part of the TMC's fortress along with North and South 24 Parganas and Howrah. They account for 91 of 294 seats in the legislative assembly.

Iran offers to open Strait of Hormuz if US lifts blockade, defers N-talks

AGENCIES @ Washington/ Cairo

IRAN has offered to reopen the Strait of Hormuz if the US lifts its blockade on Iranian ports and ends the war; two regional officials said on Monday. But there will be no negotiations on its nuclear program for now.

The proposal was passed on to the Americans by Pakistani officials. US President Donald Trump is expected to hold high-level talks with top security advisors to discuss it, reports said. The Strait's closure has put pressure on him, as oil and gasoline prices have skyrocketed ahead of crucial mid-term elections.

However, analysts are skeptical about Trump accepting the Iranian proposal. They point out that lifting the US blockade and ending the war would remove Trump's leverage in any

DAY 59 | WAR WATCH

Shots fired at ship with 17 Indian crew

A Togo-flagged oil and chemical tanker was involved in an incident near Oman after warning shots were fired by Iranian authorities, though all 17 Indian crew onboard were safe, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways said on Monday

future talks with Iran.

Sources told CNN that Trump will also weigh his options during the meeting, including whether or not to resume the US bombing campaign.

In a related development, Ira-

nian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met Russian President Vladimir Putin at St Petersburg. He blamed "excessive demands" from the US for the failure of talks. "The US approaches caused the previous round of negotiations, despite progress, to fail to reach its goals because of the excessive demands," he said.

Meanwhile, under a proposed Iranian law, the country's armed forces would become the authority responsible for managing the Strait of Hormuz. The draft legislation also provides that financial gains from the Strait would be paid in Iran's rial currency.

Reports said Iran tried to persuade Oman to support a mechanism to collect tolls from vessels passing through the strait. Oman's response wasn't immediately clear.

COOKER BLAST CASE

Key accused sentenced to 10 years of RI

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

ISIS member Mohammed Sharif, 27, the prime accused in the 2002 Mangaluru pressure cooker blast case, has been sentenced to undergo 10 years of rigorous imprisonment along with a fine of Rs 92,000 by a Special Court for National Investigation Agency (NIA) cases in Bengaluru on Monday.

A native of Shivamogga, Sharif is the key accused in the November 19, 2022 blast case. Sharif suffered severe burns when the pressure cooker IED he was taking in an auto-rickshaw to plant at Kadri Manjunatha Temple in Mangaluru to create communal tension accidentally detonated around 4.30 pm due to faulty setting of the timer.

He has been convicted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. He has also been sentenced for attempt to murder, criminal conspiracy and causing grievous hurt to auto driver Purushotham Poojary, and also under the provisions of the Explosive Substances Act. **PS**

Not paid dues, 2 men cut cables to 240+ CCTVs at Chinnaswamy

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

ANGRY over bills not being paid, two men allegedly cut optical fibre cables connected to over 240 CCTV cameras at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium on April 24, ahead of the IPL cricket match between Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) and Gujarat Titans. This severely affected security surveillance by the police, who were monitoring the stadium.

The Cubbon Park police registered an FIR against the two persons - Manjunath E (37), hailing from Chitradurga, and Abdul Kalam (19) from Uttar Pradesh. The police have been relying on CCTV footage and AI technology for crowd control after the stampede at the stadium on June 4 last year.

The complaint was filed by Aditya Bhat, an employee of Staqu Technologies, a Gurugram-based firm that provides AI-driven surveillance solutions during matches. On April 24, before the RCB vs Gujarat Titans match, the company's team conducted an inspection of the cameras in the morning and found that over 240 cameras were switched off. **PS**

EXPRESS READ

RCB pacers flatten DC, cruise to nine-wicket win

New Delhi: Royal Challengers Bengaluru rode a storm of sheer pace fury to annihilate Delhi Capitals by nine wickets in their IPL clash here on Monday. Josh Hazlewood (4/12) and Bhuvneshwar Kumar (3/5) turned the powerplay into a demolition act. All Delhi could manage was 75 in 16.3 overs. Chasing a modest target, RCB opens Virat Kohli (23) and Jacob Bethell (20) sailed past the finish line in 6.3 overs | **P17**

3 die of 'sunstroke' in Odisha, tally touches 8

Bhubaneswar: As Odisha reeled under blistering hot conditions, three more persons, including two teachers, have died of sunstroke, taking the unofficial death toll to eight in the state. The latest deaths were reported from Mayurbhanj and Sundargarh districts where the temperature has been hovering in the range of 37°C to 43°C | **P7**

STATE ROLLS OUT DIGI LITIGATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM WITH SOP

ASHWINI M SRIPAD @ Bengaluru

THE Karnataka government has introduced a Litigation Management System (LMS) with a standard operating procedure (SOP) to streamline handling of court cases, improve accountability and reduce delays by government departments in dealing with legal cases. The system features a digital case tracking module integrated with e-office for real-time monitoring. Departments must upload case details within 48 hours of receiving court orders.

The system mandates complete digitisation of litigation records and minimisation of physical file movement, stated the notification, issued by the principal secretary to the Law, Justice and Human Rights Department.

The notification, issued recently, pointed to the Karna-



taka High Court (Writ Appeal No. 20277/2025, Kalaburagi Bench) observation that highlighted delays, poor coordination and lack of accountability in government litigation.

The new system, developed in response to the high court's order, will have a streamlined SOP to ensure timely action, clear responsibility and effective coordination, which will be monitored continuously.

The SOP states that a dedicated digital case tracking module will be developed that

will capture and track issues like court orders received by each department, date of receipt, limitation period for filing appeals, stagewise movement of files within the department, tracking of cases, officer-wise responsibility mapping and more. The SOP stresses on appointing a litigation nodal officer who will monitor all litigation and co-ordinate with the panel of advocates.

Each case will be fixed on concerned advocates. These advocates must apply for a certified copy of the order/judgment within 48 hours of its pronouncement or disposal. Later, they should provide an opinion within seven days overseen by the Litigation Conducting Officer and Supervisory Officer. "Any delay shall be recorded and attributed to specific officers," it warned. **CONTINUED ON: P6**

RISING TEMPERATURES

Check destination weather before heading out: IMD

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

THE India Meteorological Department (IMD) has advised people to check weather conditions of their destinations before starting their journey.

The advisory has been issued as temperatures are rising not just in Karnataka, but across India. Officials said weather has been varying drastically in different locations this summer which can impact people's health. While some regions are experiencing hot and humid conditions, others dry heat. Some other regions are experiencing a heatwave, while some have thundershowers.

Director General of Meteorology, IMD, Mrityunjay Mohapatra said there are weather variations across India. If one is travelling to the Northeast, they will need a blanket, while

City to receive rain in next 2 days: Forecast

IMD (Bengaluru) Director N Puvvarasan said the city is likely to receive rainfall from Wednesday or Thursday. He said a forecast of 1-2 cm rain has been issued. This will bring a short respite, but temperatures will rise again | **P2**

in case of central India one will have to look for shelter to save themselves from the summer heat. Some regions in the Northwest are experiencing rainfall.

A heatwave alert was issued for some regions two days ago, but in the next couple of days, the weather will change as rainfall has been forecast.

"People should check IMD's website for weather conditions and alerts before heading out," he said. **CONTINUED ON: P2**

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Shortage of IPS officers cripples IB operations, 40% posts remain vacant

MUKESH RANJAN @ New Delhi

THE Intelligence Bureau (IB), India's premier internal security agency, is facing an acute shortage of IPS officers especially in the mid-level ranks that are vital for operational effectiveness and coordination on the ground.

The latest official data on sanctioned posts and vacancies in central police organisations and central armed police forces point to a sharp imbalance in

the IB's staffing structure.

Senior leadership roles such as Director General, Special Director and Inspector General are adequately filled. But, the situation changes drastically at the levels of Deputy Inspector General (DIG) and Superintendent of Police (SP), where vacancies have reached nearly 50% of the sanctioned strength.

Out of a total of 203 sanctioned IPS posts in the IB, as

many as 81 remain unfilled, indicating an overall shortfall of around 40%. The DIG rank alone accounts for 36 vacancies against 63 sanctioned posts, while at the SP level, 45 positions are vacant out of a total strength of 83.

These mid-level officers play a critical role in the intelligence agency as they supervise field operations, handle sensitive inputs and coordinate with other agen-

Why mid-level officers matter

Mid-level officers play a crucial role in the intelligence gathering architecture. DIGs and SPs are responsible for supervising field operations, handling sensitive inputs, and ensuring the swift flow of actionable information across agencies. Their absence impacts operational efficiency and responsiveness

cies. The absence of these officers, therefore, directly impacts the IB's operational efficiency.

Pointing to structural challenges behind the shortage, officials said the IB relies heavily

on deputation from state cadres, but state police forces themselves are grappling with manpower constraints and rising law-and-order responsibilities.

This has reduced the pool of

officers available for central postings. Additionally, shorter tenures and frequent transfers hinder continuity in intelligence operations, while state-Centre dynamics further complicate deputation processes.

The staffing crunch comes amid an increasingly complex internal security environment, marked by evolving threats such as terrorism, extremism, cyber espionage and organised crime, underscoring the urgency of addressing the gap.

